

# History Research Center

## Ho Chi Minh

Most Americans know Ho Chi Minh as the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and America's opponent during the Vietnam War. However, during World War II, this popular Vietnamese political figure collaborated with the U.S. [Office of Strategic Services \(OSS\)](#) in guerrilla operations against the Japanese occupiers of Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh was born Nguyen That Thanh (and was also called Nguyen Ai Quoc) in the village of Kim Lien, where his father was an impoverished scholar. Raised in poverty, Ho was educated at the grammar school in the ancient city of Hue and went to work for a time as a schoolmaster before he enrolled at a technical institute in Saigon. He left Vietnam (then called French Indochina) in 1911 to work as a cook, first on a French ocean liner and then at a London hotel. With the end of World War I, he moved to France, where he became a socialist and a Vietnamese nationalist. During the 1919 [Paris Peace Conference](#) ending World War I, he petitioned for civil rights in French Indochina, and when he was rebuffed, he became sufficiently radicalized to found the French Communist Party. He traveled to the Soviet Union to study revolutionary methods and joined the Comintern, the Moscow-based organization dedicated to the dissemination of communism worldwide. Ho was assigned to do no less than bring communism to East Asia. In 1930, he founded the Indochinese Communist Party and lived for the rest of the decade in the Soviet Union and China.

With the outbreak of World War II, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam, where, in 1941, he organized the Communist-controlled League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, which became the focus of the resistance movement against Japanese occupation. During the war, despite a period of imprisonment by the anti-Communist Nationalist Chinese in 1942–43 (during which he adopted "Ho Chi Minh"—He Who Enlightens—as his name), Ho formed a relationship with the OSS, which helped him to develop a Vietnamese guerilla movement to fight the Japanese. After the war, this very network would become the core of Communist resistance, first to the return of French colonial domination and then to American efforts to overthrow the North Vietnamese regime during the Vietnam War.

On September 2, 1945, after the Japanese surrender in World War II, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and became its first president. For the next quarter century, he served as president of a divided, embattled people. Ho led the Viet Minh in eight years of guerrilla warfare against French colonial forces from 1946 to 1954. With his top general, [Vo Nguyen Giap](#), he decisively defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, then turned to 15 years of battle against the anti-Communist South Vietnamese regime. Beginning about 1959, the United States became involved in this struggle, first in a military advisory capacity and, eventually, as a major combatant. By 1969, about 500,000 U.S. troops were fighting in Southeast Asia.

Ho Chi Minh did not live to see the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam and the nation's unification under a Communist government. Indeed, his active role in the war against the south decreased beginning in 1959 as his health declined.

### Further Information

Druiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. New York: Theia, 2001

Ho Chi Minh. *Selected Writings 1920–1969*. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001

Lacouture, Jean. *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*. New York: Random House, 1968.

Copyright © 2015 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.